

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 13.10-17)**

Sarah Bachelard

I find the reading we have just heard a very moving passage. At one level, we have heard it all before. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath and, surprise, surprise, is confronted with someone to heal. He performs the healing and, surprise, surprise, the leader of the synagogue is shocked and objects. Jesus dismisses the objection, his opponents are put to shame, and the entire crowd rejoices. It's almost a set-piece in the gospel stories, a bit like a pantomime with the synagogue leader *in persona* villain, the crowd watching in a kind of enjoyable tension, and we readers able to see the whole drama unfold as if from outside, whispering to the hero, Jesus, 'he's *behind you*'.

And, at one level, we know the theological meanings that these stories encode: Jesus is revealing something about the nature of God that feels revolutionary. He is teaching, showing that God does not care nearly as much about the religious rules as we are inclined to, that God is the presence of healing love and forgives our brokenness, and that we get our religion all wrong if we focus on law-keeping and forget mercy and grace. The Sabbath is made for man, for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath, is the summing up of this theme that resounds again and again through the gospel narratives. God is about healing, not condemnation; God is about fullness of life, not 'getting it all right'.

So what is it that is so particularly moving about this episode, this instance of the gospels' recurrent theme? For me, it's in the details that Luke gives us, the vividness of the picture he paints, and what that teaches us about love – God's and ours.

There's the picture Luke gives us of the leader of the synagogue as a petty bureaucrat, not cruel but a bit officious, focused more on the needs of efficient administration than on the needs of those who are suffering. He doesn't want to forbid the possibility of healing – not at all. But there is a right time and a place for things, and really, we must have some order. '[I]ndignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, [he] *kept* saying to the crowd [more than once, he said to them]: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured". You see, he is not an unreasonable man, not unfeeling. But don't come on the Sabbath, when work ought not to be done.

The political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, attended the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the engineers of the Jewish genocide, the 'Final Solution', in Nazi Germany. She wrote about it in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. One of the things she was most struck by, she said, was the ordinariness of Eichmann: she had come expecting a monster, but what she found was a mid-level bureaucrat, who had no particular feelings of hatred or ill-will towards the Jews (he insisted on this point), but who had been so fixated on the logistics of the train transports to the death camps, managing the ghettos and the sheer volume of corpses, that he failed to notice what he was doing. It was out of this experience that Arendt coined her famous phrase, 'the banality of evil'. It is precisely in the face of the synagogue leader's banal non-recognition of what he is saying, his failure to be present to the suffering woman in front of him, that Jesus lets fly. 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?'

Now Sabbath law actually made provision for looking after animals, apparently setting out complicated instructions for how to 'untie' a knot in such a way that it didn't count as 'work'. So the hypocrisy here is not straightforwardly to do with a double-standard – as if Jesus thinks the leaders say that it's OK for them to work, but not for him. He knows that 'untying' the donkey is permissible. What he objects to, what he calls their hypocrisy, is their being obsessed by and polishing the image of their successful religious performance, like actors wearing a mask. It is this obsession with their own performance which completely blinds them to the presence of this human being in front of them, and renders them oblivious to her desperate need of compassion and refreshment.

So Jesus cuts through this urbane religious rectitude in the most beautiful and powerful way. "You hypocrites! ... ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham' – not an ox, not a donkey, but a daughter of Abraham and therefore your sister, belonging along with all the rest of you, to the people of God – 'ought not this woman' be untied, 'be set free from bondage on the Sabbath day'? How, in other words, can you possibly think that it would be OK with God to untie your donkey on the Sabbath day so that it doesn't suffer, and yet not OK with God to unbind your sister from her suffering? And in the very asking of this question, Jesus not only challenges the religious leaders to come to their senses; he also shows *his* profound attentiveness to this woman in all her particularity and need. She has been bound, he says, 'for eighteen long years' – and in that little word 'long' is a world of compassion, recognition and acknowledgement. He sees her and she is set free.

For Jesus and unlike for the religious leaders, this woman (although she is unnamed) is not just a prop to be used as part of a religious argument. She is not just an opportunity for him to break the Sabbath (again), or an instance of a class – one of 'the poor', 'the diseased', 'the needy'. She is herself, a daughter of Abraham, with her own

story and her own life for which to be liberated. And in responding to her in this way, Jesus teaches that the work of love is first and essentially the work of attention.

And this brings us to the continuing challenge of this story. We no longer have the same quibbles over Sabbath-keeping and we know (at least in theory) that God prefers mercy and justice over sacrifice and burnt offerings. Legalism isn't, for most of us, going to be our main issue. But *attention* – truly attending to the reality of another person, especially when they confront us with our own frailty and vulnerability, when they are different or alien in some way, truly letting ourselves be touched by them – that remains a profound spiritual work.

It involves being free enough of self-concern to notice what is going on for someone else. It involves having enough 'space' inside us to make room for another's presence – the synagogue leader is filled up with the rules, with trying to get it right. He is not a bad man; he's just not really there. And maybe some of us are so filled up with our own pain, our own busyness, fears and anxieties, that we have not seen the wattles coming into flower, or recognised strain in the faces around us, or even noticed the yearning of our own souls. 'To pay attention', writes poet Mary Oliver, 'this is our endless and proper work'. It is, Jesus shows us, the true work of love and the real source of healing – for ourselves and for others. It is what saves us from becoming so obsessed with rules and generalities, that we do evil to our brothers and sisters – who may be vulnerable or lonely, seeking work or seeking asylum, in need of housing or a community belong to – without even recognising that we are oppressing or neglecting them.

What is so profoundly moving about this passage, I think, is that it teaches that God has the room to pay this kind of attention to us. *God* is not too busy and preoccupied to love. In fact, God's is the love that knew us in our mother's womb and our name before we were born, that sees in a crippled woman the long years of her

suffering, and that yearns for her wholeness and ours. In our contemplative practice, we open ourselves to receive God's attention, we let ourselves be attended to in this way, seen just as we are. What is extraordinary is that, as we give ourselves to this practice, we discover ourselves being recreated and healed, enabled to stand up straight. We find ourselves more able to attend in our turn to the life around us, to share in Christ's healing presence in the world. As we come now to our time of meditation, may this be the prayer of our hearts, the gift we receive.